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# Social Science as Reading and Performance

## A Cultural-Sociological Understanding of Epistemology

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### Abstract

In the age of the 'return to the empirical' in which the theoretical disputes of an earlier era seem to have fallen silent, we seek to excavate the intellectual conditions for reviving theoretical debate, for it is upon this recovery that deeper understanding of the nature and purpose of empirical social science depends. We argue against the all too frequent turn to ontology, whereby critical realists have sought an epistemological guarantor of sociological validity. We seek, to the contrary, to crystallize a culturally-based, hermeneutic account of a rational social science. Derived from disputes within the sociology of culture, on the one hand, and the long-standing concerns of interpretive philosophy, on the other, we offer a cultural-sociological approach to epistemology. We view the production of truth in social science as a reading of a meaningful social world, and as a performance of truth-claims that is constrained by evidence, but whose success depends on other contextual factors. We conclude that the rationality of social science can be achieved only by forgoing ontology. Theories are abstractions of investigators' meanings that allow the interpretation of social meanings in turn, whether those are actions, relations, or structures. Successful explanations are those that intertwine these meaning structures of investigators and actors in an effective way.

### Key words

■ culture ■ epistemology ■ interpretation ■ performance ■ theory

This article began as a contribution to a conference originally entitled 'The Return to the Empirical', a title that was denarrativized into the more philosophical-sounding 'What Is the Empirical?' The first title implies an empirical thesis that we accept: in social scientific practice – and in Anglophone sociology in particular – there has been a return to empirical studies of social life, a letting go of

theoretical concerns. This is a broad trend, with many exceptions, but one which nonetheless can be felt in the bones of any young sociologist entering graduate school with the hopes of 'writing theory'.

The implications of this trend are mixed. We, as sociologists, can be pleased with ourselves for having managed the return. To explore the empirical is, after all, the aim of our social scientific calling. It distinguishes us from art, on one side, and philosophy, on the other. But the return to the empirical in our sociological practice has also had the effect of obscuring our understanding of just what the empirical is. It is perhaps a familiar irony of human experience: our enthrallment with and devotion to our new facts have distorted our understanding of what they are.

Let the pendulum swing again: a new consideration of the nature of empirical analysis in social science is called for, a new debate on presuppositions, a new *Methodenstreit*. Herein we attempt to trace the internal intellectual conditions, as they have developed in the past 40 years and as they confront us now, that necessitate this reconsideration of 'the empirical', and to outline the path that such a reconsideration might follow.

## I

Let us begin with the set of background representations that give the very idea of a return to the empirical its distinctive difference and specific meaning for working social scientists today. This background refers back to the meta-theoretical upheavals that marked the social sciences, and especially sociology, between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s. During that now long ago period of conflict and fragmentation, young intellectuals – though not only young ones – experienced an extraordinary impatience with the very idea of 'modern life', or what was then passing for it, and, so it followed, with the regnant social science paradigms that articulated, celebrated, or criticized it. This dissatisfaction resulted in an 'upward shift' in social scientific practice. There was a new and extraordinarily intense preoccupation with first principles – which reacted against, and also contributed to – a profound social and intellectual crisis.<sup>1</sup> Young minds, and older ones too, turned to the task of rethinking the answers to foundational questions. What does it mean to study society? What is theory and what is its proper role in social research? What is the nature of social action and social order? Above all, what is the social reality that we claim to grasp through the methods of empirical research? And hence, what is the empirical? During such a time, it was hardly surprising that theory seemed to be everywhere and everything, and that there were massive new investigations into the philosophy of science and social science. Such were the writings that drew disciplinary and extra-disciplinary attention in that day. Consider just a few examples.

In Germany, Jürgen Habermas's arguments against both classical Marxism and positivism became a lightning rod for theoretical debate. After his empirically-oriented *Habilitation* thesis on the transformation of the public sphere, which

was written before the period of social upheaval began, foundational questions marked everything he wrote, from *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971), in the late 1960s, to *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984) in the early 1980s. In the United Kingdom, Anthony Giddens produced a string of 'first principles' books, from *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (1971) through the interpretive and polemical works of the later 1970s (e.g. *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1993), *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979)), to his theoretical treatise on structuration theory, *The Constitution of Society* (1984), in the mid-1980s. In France, Pierre Bourdieu moved from fieldwork in Algeria to composing the electrifying *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) in 1967, translated and read in English-speaking circles in the early 1970s.

In the United States, foundational issues were all the rage. High-minded tomes and textbooks alike were devoted to exploring the so-called paradigm conflicts between functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, exchange theory, and Marxism or critical theory. One of the finest American empirical sociologists, Alvin Gouldner, shifted his intellectual life course to focus on foundational disputes. His mammoth *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, published in 1970, with its brooding sense of apocalyptic transformation, summed up the times pretty well, even if his subsequent trilogy, *The Dark Side of the Dialectic* (1974), did little to clarify them.<sup>2</sup> One of the authors of this article devoted his early work, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (Alexander, 1982), which appeared a dozen years after Gouldner's intervention, to addressing presuppositional issues. In doing so, Alexander participated in the culminating moment of theoretical reflection in American sociology, shared by a set of theorists who, in graduate school in the 1960s and 1970s, had come quite clearly to the conclusion that the parameters of social thought needed to be rethought.

Sometime in the late 1980s, without anybody really remarking upon it, this *Zeitgeist* disappeared, and this inclination to consider first principles ceased to structure the sociological imagination of young intellectuals. Even the echoes of these debates have disappeared. Within this silent canyon of sociological research as it is now understood, it is difficult for a younger sociologist even to comprehend – except perhaps through a misty-eyed nostalgia, if she is theoretically inclined – what was at stake in debates about classes in themselves and for themselves; or the acrimony with which positivism and modernization theory were attacked; or the sensibility with which the classics were (re)read as sacred tomes whose meaning had been massively and horribly distorted, and which thus must be saved, through (re)interpretation, from utter profanation. A period in sociology's intellectual history had come to an end; a state of mind was cast aside. Parsons once asked, 'Who now reads Spencer?' Half a century later, Jonathan Turner wrote, 'Who now reads Parsons?' The question today for sociologists who lived through the age of Giddens, Habermas, et al. might be: 'Who now reads Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, or intensively engages in any theoretical debate at all?'

What might be the reasons for this abandonment of theoretical discourse? One reason, the practical one, is that the theoretical upheaval itself created new frames of reference within which a normalizing and empirical social science could proceed.

Foucault himself became a 'founder of discursivity' within which research could be pursued on surveillance and capillary power; Giddens's idea of 'late modernity' could organize myriad case studies; Habermas's discourse theory allowed investigations into recognition, communication, and public life to become central to social science; Bourdieu's core concepts of habitus and field could be mobilized into research on a variety of 'fields' in society, and the relationship between habitus and field in each of them. And we would be the last to neglect the emergence of the new research program in cultural sociology, which might be said to have emerged in the mediation between Roland Barthes, Clifford Geertz, and Mary Douglas, on the one side, and such younger interlocutors as Ann Swidler, Michele Lamont, John Meyer, and Alexander, on the other.

Certainly, this is an instinctive and highly appealing way to understand the return to the empirical, as representing the normalization and routinization of the new ideas that emerged to cope with the contingent events and socio-historical processes of the 1960s and 1970s. And yet, shifts in social scientific practice are rarely so efficient and problem-solving. There was also a deep change of mood, a shift in the structure of feeling of sociologists, a vague yet powerful sense that the time for crisis and renewal had passed, that the hopes and dreams of theory belonged to a different time. Perhaps this sense developed in relation to the new social order of Reagan and Thatcher, which, no matter how abhorrent to critical intellectuals, seemed to confirm that an era had ended and a new social equilibrium had emerged in the Anglophone world. Or perhaps there was merely a sense – articulated precisely and ominously by Steven Seidman (1994) – that the 'big project' of theory had been associated with a modernist phase whose historical time had passed. The career trajectories of the iconic theorists of the 1960s generation evidence this shift in subjective orientation. Giddens left high theory for focused investigations of globality and the self. Habermas left high theory for law and Europe. Seidman left postmodern disputation for investigations of sexuality. Bourdieu became his own empirical elaborator, applying his research program in a series of middle-range studies. Alexander transitioned to empirical case studies of iconic culture and civil society. Most of all, the very emergence of postmodern sociology itself, which has so manifestly flourished in the United Kingdom and Australia, attests to this 'downward shift'. In the wake of Lyotard and Foucault, and by way of Giddens, there has emerged a whole set of very specific and concrete research programs, in race, health, body, brands, aesthetics, and economic relations. The result of this is the new knowledge of social structures that has emerged from the past two decades of 'post-theoretical' work: networks, global cities, patriarchies, normative heterosexuality, wellness regimes, body memories, information-based market systems, complexity, new social movements, the new imperialism, racial regimes, post-coloniality, performativity, globality, ecosystems, the new cosmopolitanism, the second modernity, the new nationalism, the life course, emotion-work, cultural structures, civil society.

All of these are, indeed, wonderful new things to know. But in this reengagement with the empirical, in the way that contemporary, post-1980s social scientists, both in Europe and in the Americas, see themselves and their work as deeply

concerned with the establishment of social facts and causal processes, has there not been something lost? We believe that there has. In returning to the logic of discovery – in apprehending the structures of the world as such, through observation and calculation – there has been a loss of discursive possibility.<sup>3</sup>

## II

A counter-thesis: theory is still alive, but not in the same *way*. Is theory not evident, a dissenting reader might ask, in the new interdisciplinary fields of study defined and named, not by their nineteenth-century inheritance, but by their contemporary topic: citizenship studies, critical race theory, sexuality studies and queer theory, feminist theory in its post-standpoint iterations, post-colonial studies, or in cultural studies itself? Perhaps ‘theory’ has not gone into decline, but rather has dispersed into, and helped construct, various social spaces that now seem to demand explication? Perhaps the only thing that has declined is a certain *kind* of theory – unified, overarching, certain of itself and its scientific ambitions?

There are kernels of truth in this view, to which we will return. But notice, first, that such a dispersion – if it were, in fact, the case – would itself be a part of a downward shift, in which different spaces of theory were not expected to speak to each other in generalized terms, and in which the abstraction and linguistic invention that are necessarily a part of theorizing the social were put into the service of specific, and specifically different, political and cultural needs. And notice, second, that such an account downplays the unity of sensibility that still structures social/cultural/political theory in the post-1980s era, even if part of that sensibility is a distrust of universals. Walk into a conference in almost any discipline in the social sciences or humanities, and you will be able to identify, very quickly, whether or not the speakers operate in or converse with the meanings that structure the world of contemporary theory. Do the speakers speak seriously about discourse, hegemony, or signification? Do they consider the term *habitus* with care, or do they treat it with disdain? Do they use the Weberian language of social action and interpretation carefully? Are they aware of Habermas’s reformulation of the Enlightenment project? And so on.

This meaning-world of contemporary theory is possessed of its own multiplicative languages, its own creative luminaries (e.g. Paul Gilroy, Fredric Jameson, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler), and its own central questions (e.g. empire, globality, difference and democracy, performativity). What is so striking is that this world is so massively theoreticized, so deleteriously disconnected from the disciplined pursuit of the empirical through sociological research. ‘Theory world’ is sealed off socially, economically, and culturally from the world in which social facts are produced, measured, and verified. Certainly, in the United States, different journals, different conferences, different networks, and, most importantly, different jobs keep the disciples of Jameson, Gilroy, and Butler away from the empires of Charles Tilly, Michael Burawoy, and Paula England.

Having carved out a meaning-world for itself, post-1980s theory in its contemporary form has both relinquished and been made to suffer the loss of its place next to the disciplines that pull down real research money, and which occupy the status of 'science' – the biological and physical sciences, of course, but also fields like economics, political science, management, and epidemiology. It is the scientific status of the latter that not only promises but supplies social legitimacy, which translates into fundability. In sociology, the disconnect has been massively divisive, with the result that the powerful mainstream has experienced a 'return to the empirical' while theory lives on when and where it can, rejecting the empirical and therefore complicit in the mainstream's celebrated return. In the U.S., we remain restricted by 'methodological fetishism' (Appadurai, 1986) as revealed by the impoverished character of our two national journals. Though much less widespread than in the postwar period, there remains the belief in U.S. sociology that we should say less and less about more and more, for only by restricting what we want to say can we control enough variables to sustain statistical validity. In the sociology of the United Kingdom there is a parallel movement. Sociologists embrace extra-disciplinary philosophical statements as sources of objective truth. Standing upon this new, philosophical platform, it seems that empirical argumentation can bypass the self-flagellating history of sociological dispute and gain a new, less tarnished legitimacy. The material incentives are high for this disconnect, but the intellectual costs are, if anything, even higher. For under the sign of the new empiricism marches a divisive and impoverished academic politics which secludes theory to textbooks, on the one hand, and to the work of ghettoized disciples of an uninstitutionalized and underfunded discursive dream, on the other.

Thus, what we ultimately have is not a counter-thesis concerning 'live theory', but a double perspective on the same thesis. On the one hand, from the perspective of sociology, there has been an active forgetting of theoretical disputes, a return to the empirical. On the other hand, from the more general perspective of the human sciences in contemporary western academe, there has been a distancing of theoretical consciousness from the more empirically-oriented and better-funded branches of social science. The question that must still be answered is: What has been lost in this shift?

### III

What has most clearly been lost is the increasingly finely-tuned sense of the fallacy of empiricism that developed during the turbulent decades of the upward shift. Working sociologists no longer remember – or merely dismiss as an artifact of relativist postmodern skepticism – what Parsons wrote in 1937, namely that facts are bits of theory that have taken a concrete form. Let us not, however, trace a sense of the empiricist fallacy simply to the expanded self-consciousness of a more revolutionary or more free-thinking era. It was also driven by specifically intellectual recoveries and inventions. Because it was, we would like, in fact, to think that it could be so driven again.

First among the recoveries that questioned empiricism in the 1960s and 1970s was the philosophy of hermeneutics. It was then that Wilhelm Dilthey became widely read and appropriated, along with contemporary understandings of what an 'interpretive' as compared with an explanatory science might look like, though this duality ultimately became a philosophical impediment to our own self-understanding. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Clifford Geertz made available to us a new hermeneutics, even if, in doing so, they rarely went beyond broad restatements of Dilthey's ideas, and often not even that. But simply recovering the basic tenets of hermeneutics was enough, in itself, to suggest how social explanations are limited and inspired by the experiences and sensibilities of social scientists and their communities, and that the challenge of human subjectivity warrants a reconsideration of the basic principles of social science.

It was Thomas Kuhn's radical philosophy/history of science, centered around the concepts of paradigm and exemplar, which opened up new vistas for theoretical minds, vistas which complemented and specified what was recovered from hermeneutics. Kuhn insisted on rooting empirical observations and explanations in *a priori* theoretical commitments, which could be orthodox and traditional or gestalt-shifting and revolutionary. There were other, more sophisticated philosophical thinkers who offered radical challenges to empiricism, figures such as W.V.O. Quine, Donald Davidson, Paul Feyerabend, and Richard Rorty. Kuhn, however, emerged as, and remains today, the iconic representation of such sentiments; he is the protagonist in the origin myth of the new 'science studies'.

The true theoretical implications of these new forms of understanding disappeared with the downward shift. But they were displaced not only by the increasingly confident practice of an empirical and flourishing social science, so powerfully self-validating as it is. They were pushed aside by a movement inside philosophy itself, a shift toward constructing natural and social science as forms of 'realism'.

Initiated first by Rom Harré and then joined by Roy Bhaskar, and in a different register, Mario Bunge, realism, while avoiding the sorts of correspondence theories of truth defined by their reliance on sensory perception, rescued the empirical and the rationality of those who study it, finding in normal scientific practices the ability to establish objectivity and truthfulness. There is a fundamental sense in which realism is an undeniable enrichment of intellectual discourse: it provides a 'pro-science' position with much more flexibility and philosophical depth than positivism. Furthermore, it is a position that matches in a deep hermeneutic way the sense that working natural scientists have of what they are up to, that they are uncovering the underlying structure of the world so as to explain the natural phenomena that we can observe and measure, particularly through experimental control. This is explicitly formulated in Bhaskar's work (1975, 1979) as a central accomplishment which distinguishes realism from both positivism and postmodernism. Realist philosophy of science claims the ability to understand the social and cultural world of scientists-qua-seekers-of-the-real from an ironic distance – 'epistemic relativism' – and simultaneously to theorize



how, ultimately, through the pragmatic engagement with a world possessed of ontological structure, the collective project of science is capable of judgmental rationalism. Through transcendental ontology, the sociology of science and the philosophy of science are synthesized, and the possibility of human rationality, in a long-term, collective sense, is reaffirmed.

Yet, as the deep skepticism of Rom Harré about critical realism as an epistemology for *social* science suggests (2002b), we ought to be careful not to conflate the internalization of a responsibility to grasp social reality with the ontological wager of realism as an explicit epistemology for sociology. For social science, realism – in either its strict scientific or more ‘critical’ forms – is ultimately a regressive intellectual move, that introduces the illusion of hermeneutic sophistication in the name of an ultimately untenable metaphor linking the causal power of natural forces to the ontological theory of emergent social structures as the basis for sociological explanation (King, 2004; Kemp, 2005; Reed, 2008). Perhaps, in its more sophisticated forms, scientific realism can synthesize the sociology and the philosophy of *natural* science, producing an account of how the pragmatics of experimentation provide a clear and singular means of communication and rationality for scientists who would otherwise be subject to the whims of their lifeworlds, thus enabling physicists to tell the truth to each other. But, naïve and simple as the claim may be (ridiculed frequently by realists and empiricists), it remains the case that atoms do not have lifeworlds, and, that, for this reason, the possibilities for the grounding of human interpretation in the pragmatic manipulation of nature remain different than the possibilities for grounding the interpretation and explanation of what the Azande are up to (for example).<sup>4</sup>

Under the sign of realism, the return of the empirical has placed brackets around the still startlingly fragmented nature of contemporary social science, the incommensurable nature of its disagreements, and the (now increasingly explicit) ethical status of its investigations. It is quite extraordinary how, today, even the most ‘speculative’, morally and theoretically imbedded research programs – think, for example, of the writings of Zygmunt Bauman, Nikolas Rose, or David Held – are presented as forms of factual argument, based on empirical knowledge and supported by disciplined methodological study.

In all of this, there has been – as a symptom of the downward shift – a frequent and deeply unfortunate conflation of generality in theoretical discourse with scientism or naturalism. In the world of contemporary theory, the reigning assumption is often that anti-positivism implies or is implied by the downward shift, that abstract argumentation is inherently connected to the egotism of an exclusive Western scientific reason. Foucault’s taste for embedding polemical theoretical argument in concrete and discrete historic investigations has been highly significant, and significantly misleading, in this regard. Many followed the path of this ironic, ‘fortunate positivist’ and internalized his suspicion of depth interpretation as one more discursive ruse of unified reason. One might also speculate that feminist theory’s justified and brilliant criticisms and reformulations of psychoanalysis played a role here as well – to work at a general level of interpretation came to be seen as an exercise in patriarchy.

In this polemical context, it is not surprising that 'critical' realism has become a compelling discourse, not only for empirical sociologists, but for the theoretically inclined as well. To secure the possibility of empirical responsibility, moral critique, and theoretical justification all at once; to derive values from facts; to regain the unifying epistemic power of Marxism without being forced into its specific political commitments: this surely is a tempting possibility for a theorist in the fallen era of the downward shift, and a 'way out' of the science/anti-science divide.

In terms of the contemporary moment, then, realism is *narratively* satisfying, a condition which explains the ability of so many of its adherents to overlook its elisions and theoretical gaps. Realism is the third act of a three-part drama that resolves the tensions opened up by of the 1960s and 1970s (Act I), and overcomes the fears or relativism and irrelevancy presented by postmodern skepticism and the curriculum wars of the 1980s (Act II). The central players in Act II were the hyper-reflexive anthropologists, who carried out an Oedipal slaying of Geertz, Sahlins, and co. Rather than saying, along with Said, for example, that Orientalism was a bias imposed by the particularism of certain historical circumstances, James Clifford suggested that every ethnographic observation is allegorical. More generally, the 'Writing Culture' collective collapsed any and all social scientific writing into the global interests of capitalists and colonizers, under the sign of Foucault's 'knowledge is made for cutting'. Luckily for many, Roy Bhaskar was there to save the day in Act III. We are not so sure.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV

A different narrative arc is possible, and with its reach a different epistemic conclusion. Woven in and out of the new empirical worlds of interest has been the concern with the cultural, which emerges historically from the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. When anthropology was entering crisis mode, the sociology of culture section of the ASA was just getting started, and cultural historians in the United States were taking on the lessons of Geertz, Kuhn, and Bernard Baylin so as to reconsider how one might explain the history of the West and reconsider historiography (e.g. White, 1973). In sociology, the end of the theoretical *Zeitgeist* was coextensive with a different Act II: the slow, steady, epistemically unaware but ultimately highly productive development of sociological studies of culture. Today, the culture section of the American Sociological Association has more members than any other; it massively outnumbers sections devoted to such classic sociological concerns as social movements, class, politics, stratification, and the like. In the United Kingdom, *Theory, Culture & Society* is, if not the nation's leading journal, certainly the most influential on the global scene. It is also noteworthy that the first new journal the BSA has established in two decades has named itself *Cultural Sociology*.

Inside the culture section of the ASA, one finds fierce versions of the same epistemological divides that used to agitate self-proclaimed theorists – positivism

vs. realism vs. hermeneutics vs. pragmatism; the culture of politics vs. the politics of culture; production and consumption; local knowledge and general claims. In the work of most sociology of culture section members, these disputes are 'downward shifted', embedded and understood inside empirical research. Still, we find in these intense disputes the potential for a reopening of theoretical and meta-theoretical debate of the kind that can enrich our self-understanding and, indeed, the quality of our empirical research. The insights of cultural sociology can speak to the problems of epistemology. 'Epistemology culturalized', would, as we see it, involve two central theses: (1) that empirical objects in social science double-signify, which is to say they participate as signifiers in two systems of meaning whose overlap is never complete; and (2) that social science, in its production and pursuit of truth, is a performance, consisting of speech acts that are symbolic and connotative as much as they are constative and denotative. The first thesis explicitly addresses the hypostatized relationship between theory and reality in social research; the second articulates, in the language of performance theory, the active processes by which theory and empirical evidence are used to construct sociological explanations.

In proposing these theses for further elaboration, we are attempting to bring epistemology back in, and to move beyond, or at least to make more complex, the familiar cultural sociological argument that culture is 'constitutive' of the social – that all supposedly 'hard' social structures are in fact infused with and dependent upon 'soft' culture. While such infusion is definitely the case, we must also ask, what do such arguments really entail about the construction of sociological knowledge? We feel that such arguments 'for culture' tend to be too ontological by half; they pose the question of culture in the Caesar's grammar of scientific realism, arguing that culture is a force greater in its effectiveness than political opportunity structures or economic resources. They tend not to answer the epistemic query: if everyone is ordered by meaning, does it matter that sociologists see themselves as oriented to empirical facts rather than as elaborating their personal *Weltanschauungen*? Against the fear of relativism that haunts a cultural social science, we suggest that the implications of the cultural turn for the epistemology of social science are more complex, and not nearly so challenging of the Enlightenment ambitions of a social science.

Let us begin with a strongly anti-positivist proposal: When we do empirical research, we are 'reading', not 'observing'. Yes, we are oriented towards that which can be seen, recorded, and sometimes quantitatively measured; without this evidence of social life, sociology as a discipline could not exist. But what do we do with this data? We embed it in our own theoretical meaning-systems, and in so doing describe *the meaning-systems in the social world in which the data was embedded*. The truth-products of empirical social science are sign systems of signifier/signified relationships. The truth signs participate in a *double* system of reference, in the world of meaning that is social scientific theory, on the one hand, and the world of meaning that 'surrounds' social actions, on the other.

The referential realities of sociological explanations, then, are meanings, some of which have congealed or been elaborated into the 'harder' stuff of political

and economic structures. These realities, however, are only accessible through our own researcher-meanings, which, in the case of good theories, good ideal-types, good models of social process, enable the possibility of effective interpretation. Empirical objects do 'speak to us', and we strive mightily to 'know' them, and what explains them, in an honest way. But all we can really do is 'know' them in the way we know aesthetic objects, through our hopes, sensibilities, mental maps, and expectations. The difference from aesthetic knowing is that, in social science, our knowings are sublimated into the rationalized, abstract, and rigorous discourse of substantive social theory. So 'the empirical' is suspended between two sign systems: our theoretical presuppositions and our explanatory *post*-suppositions about the case at hand.

Note the direct inversion of the precepts of critical realism. That philosophy of science insists that the social scientist *begins* with the hermeneutic operation of knowing 'actors' meanings' and moves from there to the underlying, real 'structures' via the conversion of proto-scientific into scientific concepts. Our position, by contrast, places hermeneutics at the endpoint, as much as at the beginning, of the operation of sociological explanation. Social science can be understood as a dialectic that tacks back and forth between weak and strong hermeneutics. The operations of weak hermeneutics are the recording of observations; the familiarization of strange sayings, doings, and assumings; the organization of qualitative and quantitative data. The operations of strong hermeneutics, by contrast, explicitly posit the existence of meaning structures, whose scope and rigidity must be argued with reference to theoretical concepts and recorded evidence. Bhaskar, with Marx by his side, is ultimately wedded to the *contradiction* of surface concepts by deep realities, which explain not only empirical data but also its misinterpretation by social actors (i.e. ideology). With Clifford Geertz and the early Michel Foucault, we are skeptical about the so-called 'discovery' of such deep structures. Our suggestion is that they are less discoveries than interpretations, meaning structures that emerge in the interplay between the obdurateness of social reality; its (weakly) hermeneutic reconstruction as data; the culture structures of social theory; and the structures of feeling of investigators themselves. Instead of a logic of scientific discovery, social scientists are continually involved in a sort of epistemological deep play, putting our inner meanings at risk in attempting to grasp the inner meanings of other people and things whose reality is outside ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

Another way to put this is that, even as they exist ontologically outside of ourselves, empirical objects are textualized: they sit in the middle of the social text. Thus we need a textual theory to understand what we do when we read them. We propose that when we use our theoretical apparatus, the empirical become signifieds to our theoretical signifiers. Rather than revealing the 'real' world, our descriptors of empirical objects should be seen as signs that bring together theory and observation, and thus partake of both. Then these meanings, developed to describe, become the facts upon which we build to create our explanations. In these explanations, the signs (containing theory and observation) become in turn the signifiers in a second order of signs, where the signifieds are the deeper

meanings that help us explain social action – invisible culture structures. So, there is neither a strictly deductive relationship between theory and evidence, nor a strictly inductive relationship between evidence and explanation. Furthermore, there is no direct ontological referent for theoretical terms. It is rather that, in using theory to interpret evidence, there is always already a gap, a moment of difference, between the social world as it is constructed by theory – as a meaning-system unto itself – and the social world of postsuppositional signifieds, meaning-systems that are more contingently affected by ‘date inputs’ of the real world, which the empirical-rational-disciplinary commitments of social science demand that practitioners be open to.

While this reconstruction of interpretive epistemology emphasizes the importance and relative independence of data, it actually provides a more expansive role for culture structures and hermeneutical interpretation. In the following, wonderfully illustrative<sup>7</sup> quote, for example, Clifford Geertz restricts the reach of a meaning-centered hermeneutic method to the task of explaining culture alone:

A repertoire of very general, made-in-the-academy concepts and systems of concepts – ‘integration,’ ‘rationalization,’ ‘symbol,’ ‘ideology,’ ‘ethos,’ ‘revolution,’ ‘identity,’ ‘metaphor,’ ‘structure,’ ‘ritual,’ ‘world view,’ ‘actor,’ ‘function,’ ‘sacred,’ and, of course, ‘culture’ itself – is woven into the body of thick-description ethnography in the hope of rendering mere occurrences scientifically eloquent. The aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics. (Geertz, 2000b: 28)

We would fault this characterization of social scientific epistemology for its implicit suggestion that the embeddedness of fact-in-theory is restricted to the ‘description’ of culture. As we see it, the culturalization of epistemology applies to the study of every explanandum, not only to soft variables but the most real, effective, and powerful of social structures.

Consider, for example, Judith Butler’s work on performativity and sex/gender. If there has ever been an example of an empirical ‘discovery’ opening up an entirely new field of normal scientific research in social science, this is it. Butler’s work set up countless empirical investigations into the sex-gender system as a social structure whose ‘hardness’ is undeniable, a structure reproduced by everyday performances in combination with systems of social sanction that include overt violence and institutional power, as well as elaborate regimes of discrimination. Yet how, exactly, did Butler come to this ‘discovery’ in her writing and thus aid in launching the sociology of sexuality? She did so by using a world of theoretical meanings provided by, among others, Foucault, Austin, Derrida, Goffman, Turner and Wittig. Using these *a priori*s, she reinterpreted the most basic of ‘observational data’, the everyday act of ‘being’ a man or woman in contemporary Western societies, as ‘doing gender’. In *Gender Trouble*, we can see the complex process of epistemological resignification at work, as the meanings of theory are brought to bear upon evidence, which then produces a new post-suppositional (meaning) structure, posited as that whole which explains the parts.

In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction. (Butler, 1999: 176)

Only the nefarious suspicions of realist theory would suggest that Butler's theoretical innovations represent a claim for the radical freedom of gender performance – as if her new theoretical account of sex/gender performance referred directly and ontologically to the innate ability of anyone at any time to throw off the yoke of social structure. Her substantive point is, of course, the exact opposite – to identify the radical reach of heteronormativity as a system of power and control. She is pointing to the power of new kind of social structure. If we understand that Butler's point is that this social structure – like others, whether in the world of economy, religion, race, or state – is a sedimented and institutionalized structure of meaning, then we understand that meaning-interpretation is the way to study it. Stimulated by new theoretical ideas and by new ideological sensibilities, Butler was able to resignify the sex/gender system, creating an empirical object and pointing to a new kind of explanatory model. Rather than providing a new ontology of sex and gender, she makes social performance central, suggesting that the ontological genre of theory would disable and incapacitate empirical insight:

That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control what differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the 'integrity' of the subject. (Butler, 1999: 173)

Rather than saying that culture constitutes the social, it seems more revealing to say that the social is better understood in the terms we use to theorize 'culture' than in the terms we use to theorize 'nature'. If forced to speak ontologically, we would say that social structures are sedimentations of cultural structures, crystallized structures of meaning that have been so deeply entrenched and legitimated that they produce material incentives for conformity and punishments for deviance. Social structure thus might be compared to laws, not the natural but the legal ones: They are deeply entrenched preference structures with sanctions attached. We propose, then, an alternative to the brave and lonely 'observing' and 'testing' social scientist confronting either the bald-faced empirical or the overwhelming ontological reality of deep structure. Researching society empirically involves, instead, a complex double reading. Social actors are 'reading' reality, moving pragmatically in relation to their meaning systems, and we are 'reading them', trying to get inside their own arrangements by using our own meanings. When we do so successfully, we have the beginnings of a sociological explanation.<sup>8</sup>

## V

The sociologist, then, comes to her data with a set of theoretical presuppositions, and attempts to arrive at a set of postsuppositions, the latter being the meanings which 'constitute' the social reality that, by interpreting evidence, the sociologist proposes to explain and reconstruct. It is simply wrong-headed to expect the rationality of social scientific discourse to derive from this reality, by way either of the rationality and thus universal comprehensibility of the human actors we study or the ontological stability of social structure. It is in the very comprehension of difference – 'others, guarding other sheep in other valleys' (Geertz, 2000b: 30) – that the very capacity of sociology to explain rests. And, Habermas's oeuvre notwithstanding, the possibilities for understanding social action, and thus proposing a hermeneutic explanation of it, are not coextensive with the dialogic ability to interrogate its rationality. Indeed, quite the opposite.

When social scientists publish evidence, and open their research to the inquiring eyes of their colleagues, there is, no doubt, some procedural rationality at work. But one would need a much more in-depth model of academic life than that of a reasonable conversation – or even that of public criticism – to comprehend what happens when sociologists bring the facts forward and scrutinize theories. We believe that this model should be understood more as a social performance (Alexander, 2006). The social scientist must communicate her understandings by producing, and projecting, her own scientific texts. So observational reading becomes writing, as the sociologist attempts to convince her colleagues of the truth value of her work. This means offering a perspicacious interpretation of what explains a set of social actions and social orders of general concern to the scholarly community, e.g., the French Revolution, American elections, falling middle-class incomes, the origins of modern Western capitalism. In speaking and writing for an audience, the scientist's text is not only constative but also performative; it is an effort to create, present, and mold a social world whose reality makes the data seem likely, probable, or perhaps even necessary.

In doing so, the 'empirical' becomes a means of symbolic production, one of the elements that are critical to professional or public-sociological performances. While it places significant constraints on our ability to persuade, our performances are constrained, and made possible, by other elements of performance as well. We also depend on the feasibility, for a given audience, of the philosophical presuppositions and causal frameworks that are attached to a given sociologist's research program. We depend upon institutionalized structures of social power – funding agencies, governmental, university and professional organizations that regulate publishing and advancement. The success of our truth performances is also mediated by relatively independent structures of audience reception, by our professional peers and students. And, finally, it is dependent on the relative dullness or creativity of the social scientist herself, the performative element whose sensibilities are as variable as any data can be. Scientific or academic efforts at truth seeking become performances that are stabilized via circulating networks of symbolic exchange, of 'information' for recognition (Hagstrom, 1965). In



these mutual performances, producers become critics, social powers become audiences, and critics become producers in turn. It is the plurality and complexity of this circulating network of symbolic exchange – the differentiation of the elements of scientific performance – that ultimately determine the potential to arrive at rational truth.

This model applies to the production of texts in natural science, but the performance of truth claims in social science retains a distinctive dynamic. Unlike in natural science, the performative enactment of social scientific knowledge requires the sociologist to make concrete *two* meaning-full worlds simultaneously – that of her colleagues and that of her research subjects. Her text must reveal the world that explains the facts in the terms of the world that theorizes them. And thus it is always deductive and inductive, paradigmatic and syntagmatic, denotative and connotative, ‘explanation’ (grasping that which fundamentally accounts for the actions of others) and ‘interpretation’ (dependent upon our theories and our intuitions for this very grasping). And between these two meaning worlds there will always exist a gap, a difference. This does not result in free-floating and irrational relativism, but it does displace the work of empirical responsibility – away from the ontological security of the object and away from the rationality of the individual researchers to the elective affinity between the meanings of theory and the meanings of a given case. If these meanings can ‘grasp’ each other, the door to sociological understanding – and hence the explanation of action<sup>9</sup> – is thrown open. This mutual grasping is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being recognized as truthful by the scientific community, an audience that attributes verisimilitude only on the basis of performance.

## VI

A long time ago, as the ‘upward shift’ began, Jacques Derrida argued<sup>10</sup> that structuralism, as a then-dominant universal-scientific theory in French ethnology, contained its own critique. Careful study of the central theoretical texts of Lévi-Strauss brought Derrida to the realization that in the human sciences ontological discourse is an illusion, and that core theoretical distinctions – like that between nature and culture – are useful precisely as interpretive tools for grasping this or that social formation, this or that myth, and in enabling us to show how the ‘ontology’ of the social is repeatedly re-constituted through the efficacies of social meaning.

But in our collective construction of the myth of Derrida and postmodern skepticism, we seem to have missed the point of ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’. This deconstruction of the human sciences did not show how they are impossible, but rather outlined the conditions of their possibility: that social scientists would have to use theories to comprehend meanings which are not their own, in an iterative repetition of empirical truth-making that does not accumulate so much as it proliferates. The truths it proliferates do not come in the form of an effective reduction to the fundamental



structures of the social, but rather a comprehension of the different forms of life that societies have used meaning to enact.

Gadamer has been misinterpreted in exactly this way as well (though in both cases the fault lies, to some degree, with the philosophers themselves). He too proposed that the human sciences were of necessity premised upon the attempt to understand the meaning-worlds in which other social actors are immersed, and that social scientists would of necessity bring to this attempt certain presuppositions. And he too was interpreted as a relativist who suggested that rationality and empirical responsibility were impossible in social science.

The rationality of social science depends upon finishing with ontology, and recognizing that the truth claims of evidence are contingent upon the capacity of theories to interpret structures of extant, but invisible, social meanings. What has been lost, then, in the return to the empirical is the ability to have generalized discussions about the theoretical tools which allow us to complete our specific interpretive tasks. In the course of declaring the end of the era of theory, Steven Seidman has recently pointed out that postmodernist skepticism remained, ironically enough, highly general in its claims and aims;<sup>11</sup> in the meantime, however, the downward shift took most researchers back to the empirical. So the world has once again become split into theory and fact. This is a false dilemma. To avoid it, we envision the possibility of a cultural social science. This science is historically circumscribed, but it is also theoretically informed, empirically responsible, and epistemologically aware, and it searches for explanatory validity. Intellectual developments over the last half century have provided the conditions for such a new understanding. The cultural-sociological theory of epistemology we have outlined here is the logical result.

## Notes

- 1 The ideas of 'upward' and 'downward' shift are put forward by Steven Seidman and Jeffrey Alexander in their 'Introduction' to *The New Social Theory Reader* (2008). They do not, however, apply it only to this earlier period. The idea of an upward shift to general principles in times of crisis is consistent, as well, with the idea of 'generalization' articulated by Neil Smelser (1962) in his theory of collective behavior.
- 2 It is remarkable how quickly and completely Gouldner's work has been forgotten. While this forgetting correlated more or less with his early death and physical disappearance from the scene, its deeper explanation is the dissipation of the crisis period and the downward shift in sociology. It would have been interesting to see the manner in which Gouldner would have responded to this shift in scene.
- 3 For the notion of qualulation, which synthesizes the qualitative and quantitative, see Callon and Law (2005).
- 4 The ideological work done by the oft-repeated story that Bhaskar reported that he could have named *The Possibility of Naturalism* 'The Impossibility of Naturalism' could be the subject of an article in its own right. It is one of the great discursive achievements of the realist movement that it has been able to simultaneously appropriate and denounce hermeneutics, leaving many with the impression that the best of hermeneutic philosophy has been taken on board via 'critical' realism, while the

problems posed by an interpretive social science have been overcome. We think that social scientific realism has merely dispensed with, rather than confronted, comprehended, and moved forward through, the problems of interpretation.

- 5 It is ironic that, if we to refer to a philosophy of science, it would be the transformed, now anti-realist epistemology of Harré, Bhaskar's teacher, that we would evoke to explain the 'meaning' that critical realism carries. 'A material thing as a social object,' Harré points out, 'just is the totality of those of its affordances that the embedding narrative makes available to the protagonists' (Harré, 2002a: 30).
- 6 Of course, there is a certain elective affinity between our perspective and that of the phenomenologists, particularly Husserl and Schutz, who, along with hermeneutics, were brought into Anglophone sociology so effectively in the 1960s and 1970s by Garfinkel and his followers. This tradition was also articulated, in a different register, by Peter Winch's development of ordinary language philosophy, Wittgenstein's later work, and strands of Weber's methodology, in his classic *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (1958). However, this tradition has also been interpreted, and interpreted itself, ontologically. Often, ethnomethodology and Winch's writings are taken to refer to a sort of 'surface order' of concepts and rules, or a micro order of actions, interactions, and understandings. (Here again Bhaskar is highly influential, and in particular his critique of Winch as representative of the hermeneutic tradition in *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1998: 120–59)).

This interpretation of the implications of phenomenology for sociology is highly unfortunate. As we see it, the philosophical premises of phenomenology do not have to be translated into a microsociology of interaction, but rather imply a constant hermeneutic imperative to investigate the background meanings which make interaction possible in the first place, and which cannot be determined ontologically. In other words, the philosophy of consciousness is entirely compatible with empirically-based attempts to reconstruct vast discursive formations (Foucault, 1965, 1971, 1972); to grasp ethos, world view, and sacred symbols (Geertz, 2000a); and to reconstruct the historical and cultural specificities of even the most external 'structural systems' (Dilthey, 1976: 192).

- 7 Unfortunately, Geertz often minimized the role of the theoretical side of data collection and explanation, camouflaging as merely 'thick description' what were, in fact, social scientific findings that were deeply imbedded in the immense theoretical sophistication he brought to his ethnographic investigations. This argument is one of the connecting threads in the colloquium on 'Clifford Geertz and the Strong Program', in *Cultural Sociology* (July 2008, e.g., the introduction in Alexander, 2008 and the more philosophically-oriented Reed, 2008).
- 8 Though there is some similarity of language here, our point of view is directly opposed to Giddens's structuration theory, despite his repeated insistence upon the 'anthropological moment' or 'double hermeneutic' that characterizes social science. In a similar way to his more openly realist colleagues, Giddens's hermeneutics is supervenient upon his social ontology. He takes the latter to be the core problem of social theory, and rarely has directed his macrosociological investigations of social structures to the problem of meanings. (His more recent microsociology of selfhood is quite a different and more intriguing story, though it remains largely unreflected upon in theoretical terms.) Theoretically speaking, Giddens uses the term 'double hermeneutic' to refer to three interrelated ideas, all bound up, in one way or another, with his central problematic of reflexivity: (1) that social scientific knowledge is prone to re-enter and influence the social world about which the researcher has made

claims ('there is no way of standing wholly apart from reflexivity, since the social-scientific observer, by making her or his results public, relinquishes control over them' (Giddens, 1993: 13)); (2) that in 'late modernity' this re-entering is part of a larger, institutionalized reflexivity ('the double hermeneutic is thus intrinsically involved in the dislocated, fragmenting nature of modernity as such, particularly in the phase of 'high modernity' (Giddens, 1993: 9)); and (3) that, in principle, social scientific study must involve knowing what actors know and must constantly process and account for agents' ongoing accounts of what they are doing ('All social science is irretrievably hermeneutic in the sense that to be able to describe "what someone is doing" in any given context means knowing what the agent or agents themselves know, and apply, in the constitution of their activities' (Giddens, 1993: 13)).

As the foremost voice in the action-structure debate, then, Giddens has used the language of 'double hermeneutic' to insist upon agents' knowledgeability and the role of reflexivity in interaction. Furthermore, in his macrosociology, whether the earlier writings on power, structuration, and modernity or the later writings on globality, Giddens typically employs the language of reflexivity and 'hermeneutics' as a way to discuss the interactional limits on actors' knowledgeability about structures whose identity is not itself problematic. This conflation of hermeneutics with actors' capacities and knowledgeability – either in principle or in late modernity – deeply distorts the hermeneutic tradition of social theory, and, more importantly, undermines the capacity of hermeneutics to provide empirically-based sociological insight. The phenomenological premise that social science cannot escape the fact that its 'object' involves people possessed of subjectivity is certainly one we also accept. But this is not the same as making reflexivity a central ontological category for social theory, or making the knowledgeability of agents central to any explanatory account of action. Indeed, it is exactly the cultural preconditions for agentic knowledge, agentic ignorance, and agents' interests, that have to be hermeneutically clarified if a sociological account of action is to have explanatory leverage.

In other words, in contrast to Giddens, we expect a hermeneutic sociology to elucidate the manner in which structures of meaning are at the center of social structures of power. While these congealed meaning structures may be quite beyond the control of this or that set of social actors, they remain historically contingent and subjective in their ontological status. As such, these structures form the environments for action, within which actors operate, more or less skillfully, by 'reading' and 'performing' (Alexander, 1988, 2004; Alexander, Giesen et al. 2006). Social science is a reading of this performance vis-à-vis action's environments. The distinctiveness of this perspective, and its difference from Giddens's ontology, can be clearly seen not only in the cultural sociology we refer to here, but also in the exemplary works, since the 1960s, of cultural anthropology (Sahlins, 1976; Douglas, 2002) and cultural history (Sewell, 1980; Darnton, 1984). For the similarity between Giddens's project and realist social theory, see Stones (2001). For a critique of the influence of 'action-centered', Giddens-influenced social ontology in the American sociology of culture, see Reed (2002). For the relationship of the epistemology we are proposing here to the phenomenological and ethnomethodological traditions upon which Giddens drew in his early work, see note 6.

- 9 This was ultimately, we contend, Weber's methodological point: 'A correct causal interpretation of a concrete course of action is arrived at when the overt action and the motives have both been correctly apprehended and at the same time their relation has become meaningfully comprehensible' (Weber, 1978: 12).

- 10 Derrida's lecture at Johns Hopkins University, in 1966, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', reprinted in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (1978).
- 11 In 'The End of an Era', Seidman (2003: 5) wrote, 'Postmodern thinkers, however, never escaped general theorizing. . . Yet, these theorists often refused to acknowledge their own general theorizing or examine their foundational assumptions.'

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